

Exhibit 16

Proposed LGBT club prompts new Rankin school policy

Kate Royals, The Clarion-Ledger 6:40 p.m. CST January 15, 2015



(Photo: Google maps)

Rankin County school board members approved a change in the district's school club policy on Wednesday in an attempt to prevent students from creating what Superintendent Lynn Weathersby referred to as "gay clubs."

Weathersby brought up the issue at Wednesday's school board meeting, making clear his intentions to limit such organizations in Rankin County schools.

"I talked to (board attorney) Freddie (Harrell) and several administrators about what we could legally do to limit organizations like that on campus that we don't want to endorse and don't want," Weathersby said.



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Brandon students react to district's club policy change

([http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2015/01/15/brandon-high-school-mississippi-gay-straight-alliance-lbgt/21834157](http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2015/01/15/brandon-high-school-mississippi-gay-straight-alliance-lbgt/21834157/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=)
[/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=](http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2015/01/15/brandon-high-school-mississippi-gay-straight-alliance-lbgt/21834157/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=))

Although school board members and officials said they were not aware of any attempt to form a club in the district, Brandon High School theatre teacher Janice Weaver said she was approached by a student in December who expressed a desire to create a gay-straight alliance (GSA), or a student-led, student-organized club aimed at combating anti-gay discrimination and bullying in schools. Weaver said the student submitted the proposal for the club to school administrators.

Currently, students at several schools in the state, including Ridgeland High School in Madison County, have created such clubs or are working to form them.

Weaver, who agreed to be the sponsor for the club, emphasized she had no knowledge whether district officials and school board members were aware of the student's proposal.

Calls to Brandon High School principal Buddy Bailey were not returned Wednesday.

In the school board meeting on Wednesday, Weathersby said he spoke with the board attorney and other administrators and learned that the best strategy for limiting organizations would be to require parents to sign a consent form allowing their children to participate in the club.

School board attorney Freddie Harrell echoed Weathersby, saying a gay club might violate educational standards and principles adopted by the school district such as abstinence-only sexual education.

Newly appointed board member Ira Singleton asked Harrell what would happen if parents did consent to their children participating in such a club. Harrell responded that at that time, it would be up to the school's principal to decide whether the club meets school requirements.

The board approved the new policy.

When questioned after the meeting, both Harrell and Weathersby emphasized the change in policy requiring parental consent applies to all student clubs.

"This is not directed to any particular club but to organizations in general," Weathersby said, noting that the beginning of a new semester is a good time to review school policies and make appropriate changes.

After initial reports of the school board adopting the policy change surfaced, the Human Rights Campaign and the American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi voiced their concerns, each noting that federal law prohibits any school that receives federal funds to ban students from conducting a meeting in a limited open forum on the basis of religious, political or philosophical speech.

A limited open forum is defined as a time when a school "grants an offering or opportunity for one or more noncurriculum related student groups to meet on school premises during the noninstructional time."

In a letter to school district officials, the ACLU pointed to several rulings by federal judges prohibiting school districts from banning the formation of gay-straight alliances, or student clubs designed to encourage a safe environment for LGBT students and discourage bullying and anti-gay harassment.

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HRC Mississippi Director Rob Hill said in a statement that the policy "sends a harmful message to LGBT students in Rankin County that they are not welcomed within their classrooms, at school functions or on the bus.

"The board's actions tell LGBT students that they should be ashamed of who they are and that their lives are valued less than their peers ... We demand the Superintendent, and the board, reverse its decision to publicly humiliate, degrade and embarrass young LGBT people."

The Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition, a group that fights harassment, bullying and unfair school policies in the state, lists several schools as either having or working to form gay-straight alliances. The Ridgeland group is classified as "pending" on the Safe Schools Coalition's website.

The group of students approached the school principal in December, according to Madison County schools Superintendent Ronnie McGehee.

They had several discussions with the students and discussed particulars such as a staff sponsor, but the group is not yet official.

"We're open to clubs that go through the process. And again that's not going to be something where somebody walks in on Monday and you have a club on Tuesday," McGehee said.

Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition co-founder Anna Davis said GSAs "can create safer, more inclusive schools which lessens the likelihood of harassment and bullying."

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